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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9820
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 5972
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 3290
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 7139
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 4396
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1679
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 1681
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 1744
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 3893
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 4310
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 8867
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC

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STATE FOR WHA/AND LPETRONI
COMMERCE FOR JANGLIN
TREASURY FOR SGOOCH
NSC FOR D.FISK

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [BL](#)

SUBJECT: SANTA CRUZ: THOUSANDS SHOW SUPPORT FOR AUTONOMY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: An estimated 400,000 people gathered in Santa Cruz June 28 to support civic leaders' campaign for a "yes" vote in the July 2 departmental autonomy referendum. Speakers accused the Morales administration of attempting to consolidate "hegemonic" power and declared autonomy a means of countering GOB objectives. Against this backdrop, some political analysts and business leaders highlighted the civic (rather than political) nature of Santa Cruz' power, while others saw the potential for the consolidation of a significant anti-MAS opposition. The sense in Santa Cruz is that if 70 percent of that department's population vote "yes" in Sunday's referendum, local officials will immediately declare the department autonomous. End summary.

¶2. (U) In a festive, peaceful event not unlike a county fair, an estimated 400,000 people gathered in Santa Cruz June 28 to support civic leaders' campaign for a "yes" vote in the July 2 departmental autonomy referendum. Parents brought babies and small children, teenagers gathered with their friends, groups congregated in nearby cafes, and rural students (many bussed in by the Pro Santa Cruz Committee) marched with their teachers. Nearly all wore pro-autonomy T-shirts or headbands boasting the green and white of Santa Cruz, and virtually everyone brandished a green and white flag bearing the words "autonomia si," or "yes for autonomy."

¶3. (U) Speakers contributed to the festive atmosphere by stepping aside for well-known bands and periodically urging the crowd, in the impassioned tones characteristic of rally leaders, to express their support at the polls. Many, including Pro Santa Cruz Committee President German Antelo, the event's principal organizer, energized listeners by accusing the Morales administration of attempting to consolidate "hegemonic" power and declaring autonomy a means of countering GOB objectives. The committee's spokesman, Daniel Castro, reportedly declared decentralization "irreversible," perhaps seeking to convince the crowd (and Morales' supporters, who were simultaneously gathered in La Paz advocating "no" votes) that Sunday's referendum outcome

could be no other than departmental autonomy.

¶4. (SBU) Against this backdrop, political analysts and business leaders highlighted the civic (rather than political) nature of Santa Cruz' power and speculated about Morales' plans. Analyst Martin Rapp characterized Santa Cruz as a "nucleus" of distinct groups, each with its own interests and goals, and declared departmental and civic leaders incapable of forging a common political structure or message. This weakness, he told Econoff, relegated Santa Cruz' outspoken leaders to defensive, rather than offensive, positions and meant they would never become national players.

According to Rapp, the absence of an organized opposition would enable Morales to carry out his political, economic, and social revolution, gradually undermining the power of those (like the military, the business community, and the church) who attacked his policies and consolidating control over political and economic institutions, much like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Morales' one big advantage, Rapp suggested, was control of the public's interpretation of events; he noted that Morales had effectively defined good and evil, painted a black and white picture of the world, and distinguished between friends and enemies of the MAS-led administration, making it difficult for any opposition to take root.

¶5. (SBU) La Paz analysts Cayetano Llobet and Oscar Eid, on the other hand, had a more optimistic view of the potential political implications of the Santa Cruz rally. They underscored the inclusiveness of its message for other Bolivian departments and its massive participation. They also noted that Evo Morales' and the MAS' campaign initiatives threatening such deeply held personal interests as private property and religion in non-public schools had "finally generated a real opposition." They agreed that the larger meaning of "Autonomy Si!" was emerging as "Democracy Si!"

¶6. (SBU) Analysts and businessmen also warned that if 70 percent of Santa Cruz' population vote "yes" in Sunday's referendum, local officials will immediately declare the department autonomous. Eastern Agriculture Chamber General Manager Mauricio Roca told Econoff he expected departmental leaders to announce victory as early as Sunday night, possibly provoking Morales by suggesting the Constituent Assembly "work out the details" instead of considering the question of autonomy itself. His counterpart, Santa Cruz Chamber of Industry and Commerce President Gabriel Dabdoub, had similar expectations, although he worried that if autonomy won relatively little support nationwide, Morales would ignore legislation requiring the issue to be decided on a departmental basis and declare that "the people" had voted against it, using the results to consolidate central government control.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The massiveness of the Santa Cruz demonstration -- said to be Bolivia's largest ever -- should give Morales pause, even if the department's political influence may be weaker than perceived. That said, Santa Cruz leaders' expected declaration of autonomy could open a new rift in regional relations -- and further pit the market-oriented, more Europeanized, and relatively wealthy lowlands of the east against the socialist, indigenous, and predominantly poor highlands of the west. End comment.
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